Early and Late Encounters
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Every library has its hidden collections, collections that should receive more attention. At Binghamton University, one of our hidden gems is the William J. Haggerty Collection of French Colonial History. This collection of some 20,000 books, pamphlets, and journals was originally the library of the private colonialist society, the Union Coloniale Française. By reading one small corner of the Haggerty Collection, focused on the depictions of indigenous Latin America, one can begin to see how French colonial lobbyists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century developed their argument for the moral necessity of French high imperialism, the so-called *mission civilatrice*.

Binghamton acquired the Haggerty Collection in 1984 from SUNY-New Paltz, where it had been since 1966. The library of the Union Coloniale opened in 1894, just a year after the creation of the society by businessmen from Marseilles and Bordeaux with economic interests in colonies. The Union Coloniale, as an advocate for colonial endeavors, collected a wide variety of materials on France’s colonies, with particular emphasis on its Africa and Asian colonies. The materials range from economic and commercial data, to travelogues, to lush publications on colonial exhibitions, to scientific articles from gentlemen’s geographic and anthropological societies. While individual titles in the collection tend not to be particularly rare or valuable, taken as a whole, the Haggerty Collection is an excellent resource for the study of this period of French history, and is believed to be one of the strongest collections of this kind outside of Aix-en-Provence, home to the official archives of the Union Coloniale.

The French colonialist societies were hugely influential in morphing the idea of French nationalism into French imperialism during the Third Republic, 1870-1940. Focusing national energies on France’s civilizing role abroad seemed a good way to distract from France’s humiliating loss of territory in continental Europe during the Franco-Prussian War. The colonies were positioned as a place to revitalize France. They could provide new trading
partners, new investment opportunities, and raw materials to maintain France’s status as a “world power.” Colonialism was couched rather as a natural extension of social Darwinism, and the imperialist propaganda produced and collected by the colonialist societies deliberately emphasized the political, economic, cultural, and racial superiority of the French, supplying a moral justification for empire.

While France’s late-nineteenth-century colonies in the Americas were few (certainly the heyday of French Atlantic empire passed with the loss of Canada, Haiti, and the sale of the Louisiana territories), there remained a fascination with indigenous life and culture. Colonialist publications tend to portray indigenous Latin Americans as falling on the extreme ends of a spectrum, as either “noble savages” or as cannibals. As one can see from the Haggerty Collection, the inhabitants of the colonies were routinely portrayed as inefficient stewards of their countries’ natural resources in such a way as to give French colonizers the moral right, even the responsibility to exploit the resources to the fullest potential.

One discovery from the collection is the fictional adventure story *A travers la Forêt Vierge, Aventures extraordinaires de deux jeunes français au Bresil.* This book from 1907 is something of an anomaly for the Haggerty Collection, which has very little fiction. In the book, two young Frenchmen (the heroes, *naturellement*) decide to go to Brazil after they discover a hidden manuscript by Jean de Lery in a copy of Hans Staden’s book that details the location of a treasure trove of diamonds buried in an Indian grave. Upon arrival in Brazil, the heroes seek out their friend Carlos’s plantation to get their bearings before setting out treasure hunting. While at the plantation, Carlos’s little sister Carlotta is kidnapped by a band of Indians and stolen into the jungle. Our heroes, with Carlos (and five of the strongest slaves on the plantation), mount a rescue mission, but they are captured and sold to a group of cannibals. Thanks to the smart decision to swipe a Guaraní dictionary from Carlos’s library, one of the heroes is able to pick up enough of the language to impersonate the tribe’s shaman at a key moment, creating a necessary distraction, which allows our party to escape the cannibals. After 100 pages of additional hijinks—including a mummy and some grave desecration à la Indiana Jones—the heroes end up with two huge perfect diamonds worth a million francs.

What is interesting is how our heroes are written to feel perfectly entitled to rob the graves and claim the diamonds as their own. They have not even the slightest twinge of conscience about their actions in Brazil. The various indigenous groups in the book are little more than caricatures. They are depicted as naïve, living so close to nature that they think diamonds are nothing more than “*pierrres transparentes,*” or they are unnatural cannibals or malicious kidnappers, in which case they do not deserve the diamonds. It is a neat justification for the plundering of the Americas and a tidy bit of colonialist propaganda aimed at young readers. Thus, the exotic Americas are shown to
be the perfect setting for this adventure story complete with lost manuscripts, jungles, diamonds, plantation heiresses, and of course, cannibals.

Even in non-fiction, the Caribs, the Americas’ first cannibals, hold a particular fascination for the French. Consider the following two books from the Haggerty Collection, both published after World War II. The first is from 1948, part of the series La Joie de Connaitre L’Adventure Humaine by Henry de Lalung, entitled *Les Caraïbes, un peuple étrange aujourd’hui disparu.* The second book is a pamphlet by the very prolific author and library director of the Geographic Society, Henri Froidevaux. The pamphlet, from 1953, is entitled *Une civilisation primitive disparue, les Caraïbes de la Guadeloupe vers 1650.* In the pamphlet, the French anthropologist Jean Baptiste Delawarde reports that by the 1950s, there are only 400-500 Dominican Caribs left on reservations. There is little discussion of how this came to be, but rather the emphasis that one often finds in writings about indigenous Latin America is on how populations have “disparu” and how the Americas are empty lands, full of virgin forests, ready for colonization. Rather than characterizing the lack of indigenous populations in the Americas as genocide, the language of “disparu,” seen in both titles, suggests a demographic mystery, not a crime. The emphasis on this presence as an absence allows the Caribbean to be seen as a blank slate, while absolving European consciences of any blame.

Of course, this trope of indigenous peoples as a presence/absence is not limited to the Caribbean. In a 1906 travelogue to be discussed in more detail later, Gaston Donnet poses the question “Comment peupler le Brésil?” then goes on to answer: “Cette question de peuplement est une très grosse question. L’Amérique du Sud est vide.” Empty. Ready to colonize. Ready to repurpose. Ready for French entrepreneurs. In the first decade of the twentieth century, there seemed to be considerable concern that the French were lagging behind other colonial and neo-colonial powers in establishing economic relations in the Americas.

In a work from the turn of the century, not long after the U.S. redrew the maps in the Caribbean post-1898, by Auguste Plane, entitled *À travers l’Amérique équatoriale: Le Pérou*, the author cannot resist chiding French businessmen for not taking better advantage of the available economic opportunities. He writes in the introduction:

*Le commerce français est en infériorité de plus en plus marquée dans le mouvement commercial des républiques sud-américaines, malgré la parenté de race et de langue qui facilite les relations. Au Pérou en particulier, les Américains du Nord et les Anglais font 75 pour 100 des échanges; ils ont construit et monopolisé les grandes voies de communication et obtenu d’importantes concessions minières et agricoles. Ce pays, grâce à ses richesses naturelles et à la salubrité de son climat, est destiné à un avenir prochain très brillant.*
There seems to be anxiety that France is behind the neo-colonial times with regards to the Americas, with its natural riches and brilliant future.

Indigenous Latin Americans were also used to put forward various “scientific” theories about race and culture, a debate that was prominent in the development of anthropology as a discipline, and certainly used to justify the civilizing mission of French imperialism. In Gaston Donnet’s *De l’Amazone au Pacifique par la Pampa et les Andes* from 1906, the travelogue is basically a place to expound on his beliefs of the inferiority of non-European races. In chapter 5, “Indigenes et Bresilienes,” he compares indigenous Brazilians to dogs in an extended, offensive metaphor.13

Later, he includes the story of the “beautiful Mrs. K,” which he heard from a friend, basically hearsay, to describe the dominance of nature over nurture.

_Une jeune fille acauan avait été élevée, dans un collège de la capitale, avec le plus grand soin. Elle était brevetée, diplômée en toutes espèces de parchemins et jouait du Beethoven sur un piano à queue. Un ingénieur allemand l’aimait et l’épousa. Ils vécurent ensemble cinq ou six ans, à l’européenne, dans une grande ville. Elle avait ses jours de réception, de bals et de concerts. On disait: «la belle madame K...»; ses toilettes étaient célèbres. L’ingénieur mourut; elle le pleura convenablement huit mois. Puis, elle vendit son piano à queue, ferma son salon, changea sa robe à traine contre un pagne de cotonnade, et la «belle madame K» s’en alla, dans le Matto Gross, rejoindre ses frères et ses soeurs qui se couvrent le corps de bouses de vache pour se préserver du diable. Et le plus curieux, c’est que ce cas d’atavisme n’est point le seul; on le retrouve pareil chez deux aborigènes australiens gradués de Cambridge, qui retournent sur les bords de la Murray, dès qu’ils ont atteint leur majorité._14

That these individuals preferred to live where they were born is evidence to Donnet of the shared nature of primitive people, where indigenous Americans are no different from Aborigines. Implicit in this story is the idea of a hierarchy of peoples, where for Donnet, it seems clear, the pinnacle of mankind is surely represented by grand pianos and reception days.

In one of the densest books in the collection, *Anthropologie Bolivienne*, one sees further attempts to use the latest “scientific” methods to understand the differences among the races.15 This three-volume work from 1908 was written by Arthur Chervin, based on notes from the “Mission Scientifique” of G. de Crequi Montfort and E. Senechal de la Grange to Bolivia in 1903-1904. The book represents the cutting-edge research of the time being done using anthropometry, craniology, and metric photography. Although originally scheduled to be part of the mission, Chervin was not able to accompany them to Bolivia. Since he could not be there in person to take the measurements himself, he devised a strict method of photographing his subjects following
Bertillon, the French inventor of anthropometry. There is a chapter in the book dedicated to how Chevrin directed his proxies in Bolivia to assemble the camera in order to have the subjects exactly the same distance away. He then took measurements from the photographs to compile tables upon tables of data. He used this data, coupled with ethnographic information collected through a series of questions posed in Bolivia, to draw his conclusions about the various indigenous populations across Bolivia, without having set foot in the country.

*Anthropologie Bolivienne* was an important book, as evidenced by the number of reviews it received in anthropological journals outside France. In a review in the journal *Man*, published by the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland from 1909, they summarize Chervin’s chief demographic conclusions remarking on 1) the importance of the mestizo community with regards to the economic and political governance of Bolivia, and 2) arguing that the sparseness of the Bolivian population is “totally inadequate for making the most of the agricultural and mineral wealth of the country.” This piece of information is very suggestive. The message, here, is that Bolivia is ripe for development for those able to meet the interests of the small mestizo populations running the country. And on the off-chance a French businessman might have to deal with the indigenous populations, he would be prepared having read the introduction where Chervin explains how to tell the city-dwelling Quechuas from the Aymara, by their dress, gait, and the shape of their face.

Despite the obvious flaws with his “research methods,” the book is full of photographs from all over Bolivia, with wonderfully detailed notes on costume and customs, the music and history, the cities and villages, of the many people living in Bolivia at this time.

That is not to say that everyone believed in a biological conception of race. This period was marked by a vigorous debate on these ideas. Binghamton also has a first edition copy of the Haitian anthropologist and educator Antenor Firmin’s *De l’égalité des races humaines (Anthropologie positive).* Written in response to Gobineau’s racist *L’inégalité des races*, Firmin’s book from 1885 decisively refutes the idea of a hierarchy of races, rather declaring the essential equality of all people. His book also incorporates critiques of craniology and anthropometry, and is considered to be one of the earliest proponents of a social theory of race.

In addition to providing people as subjects for study, the Americas were a place for the French to “discover” new plants and animals, to experiment with new agricultural practices, to unearth pre-Colombian antiquities, and to make advances in public health, geography, archaeology, and engineering. Some of the most interesting works from the collection breathlessly declare to be the first photographs of certain Patagonian peaks, describe the mushrooms of Guadeloupe, and detail the various depths at which to dig the Panama Canal. Let us consider one last book. Produced by the Ministry of War, Arms, and the
Colonies in 1920, *Les bois de la Guyane française et du Brésil* makes explicit the important role that the colonies play in providing raw materials. While the book does contain considerable botanical information, the authors admit to focusing their attentions on those woods that would likely provide the most use in rebuilding post-war France. In describing Guyana’s geography, the authors use the language of colonial propaganda:

*Notre vieille colonie de la Guyane Française forme une contrée complète-ment vierge, encore peu connue, et presque complètement déserte. Ce vaste territoire de 8,7000 kilomètres carrés, limité par les fleuves Maroni et Oyapock, les monts Tumuc-Humac et l’Océan Atlantique, est entière-ment et uniformément couvert par la forêt.*

A little later they continue: “A l’intérieur, dans la forêt, il n’y a guère qu’un population nomade, composée de mineurs et de balatistes, à laquelle il faut ajouter quelques tribus noires ou indiennes.” In emphasizing how little known and how sparsely populated the country is, the authors seem to suggest that no one would care, or even notice, if they sent in the whole French army to start chopping down trees.

After that brief introduction, the book is laid out like an encyclopedia with entries for individual species. Given the authors’ emphasis on useful woods, it is probably not surprising that the first thing mentioned for each tree is its commercial name. But also included are the scientific and vernacular names, a botanical description, the texture and density of the wood, principal and presumed uses, and perhaps most interestingly, the “*usages indigènes*” or local uses. While researchers most often use the Haggerty Collection in order to study colonialism, one can learn quite a bit about the history of science.

The publications collected by the private colonialist society, the Union Coloniale Française, paint a portrait of the Americas as lands of opportunity for French scientists and entrepreneurs, and lands full of potential for exotic adventures. French authors used indigenous Latin Americans to illustrate certain points as part of a larger argument in favor of French imperialism. As is often the case when looking at books written about the “Other,” one learns far more about the French authors than about the individual indigenous people that the books purport to be about. These few books highlighted here form a small part of the much larger William J. Haggerty Collection of French Colonial History, just as the Americas represent only a small part of France’s *mission civilatrice* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

NOTES

1. For a collection-level description of the Haggerty Collection, see http://library.binghamton.edu/specialcollections/haggerty.html.

2. The library also provided reference service for the public. According to Henri Brunschwig’s study of the Union Coloniale, the library responded to some 563 queries for
101French Colonial Perspectives of Latin America


4. Guyon, 60.


6. The Haggerty collection has some 57 books by Froidevaux, dating from 1893-1953.


8. The Haggerty has three books by Delawarde; two on Martinique’s Amerindian antiquities and one on peasants in 17th century Martinique.


12. Plane, i.


14. Donnet, 63.


23. France, 3.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


